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Cassia, for a Splash of Fall Color

There are two species of Cassia shrubs that are so attractive that they can literally stop traffic during the fall. Unfortunately, to see them you might need to take a ride through some of the older sections of town. Fifty or so years ago they were used more in area landscapes but, like other things, the kinds of plants that we use go in cycles.

Based upon what I am hearing from gardeners, the Cassias are making a comeback. For rich yellow color during the fall and winter, they are hard to beat.

Though there are over 500 species of Cassia, there are two that are more commonly grown under northern Gulf Coast conditions. *Cassia alata*, known locally as the candelabra plant, grows to a height of about eight feet. It then produces erect flower spikes that resemble fat candles before the individual blossoms open.

Butterfly Cassia, *Cassia bicapsularis*, makes a large shrub or small tree reaching a maximum height of fifteen feet. It has an open, informal habit of growth and flowers in October. Individual blossoms resemble yellow butterflies, and occur all over the plant.

Cassia Culture

- Some nurseries and garden centers offer container grown plants, especially during the fall while they are in bloom.
- Choose a planting site that receives full sunlight all day, if possible. Best growth and flowering occurs under high light conditions.
- Most Cassias, including the two mentioned earlier, are tropical or subtropical plants, so they are subject to freeze injury. They will come back year after year with some protection. Plant in an area that is protected from north winds.
- Once established Cassias grow and flower with little care. Leaves and flowers will

need protection from caterpillars during the fall. When frost kills back the stems, cut them off at ground level and pile pine needles or leaves over the root crown for cold protection.

■ Propagate by rooting cuttings or by seeding.

Lawn Pest Alert

Chinch bugs are active this summer. Residents with St. Augustine grass lawns are advised to check weekly for the occurrence of these pests and control them as necessary. The southern portions of the coastal counties usually see the highest incidence of chinch bug injury.

Early symptoms normally show up first in the most exposed areas of the lawn, such as near sidewalks and driveways. Monitoring chinch bug levels is a relatively simple procedure. Contact your nursery, garden center, landscape professional or Extension agent for further information, if needed.

All kinds of lawns are susceptible to damage from sod webworms during the late summer and fall. Watch for these pests also. Fact sheets describing the insects, damage symptoms and recommended control measures are available from your local Extension office. Call or drop by for copies.

Question of the Week: A fine webbing has appeared on the trunk and branches of my live oak trees. Underneath the webbing there are many small insects. What is this, and will it harm my trees?

Answer: A fine, silken webbing on the trunks and branches of live oaks and other rough-barked trees is a sign that psocids are present. These small insects, commonly known as bark lice or tree cattle, live under the webbing and feed on mosses and lichens found on the bark surface.

Psocids are bark cleaners, and cause no damage to the trees. Though the sudden appearance of the webbing often causes alarm, allow them to live. As soon as they have completed their life cycle, the webbing should disappear within a few weeks.